

# Literacy Links

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Education



**"The object of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives."**

**~Robert Maynard Hutchins**



As a new school year begins and educators look ahead to instruction, it is quite likely that teaching students how to develop constructed responses will be high on the list of topics. While the impetus to teach constructed response is often the desire to prepare learners for State assessments, the importance of teaching constructed response as a life long skill should really be the impetus. In this month's spotlight topic, we will make the case that teaching students how to construct written and oral responses should be a primary instructional goal, not simply a test taking strategy.

## Spotlight on...

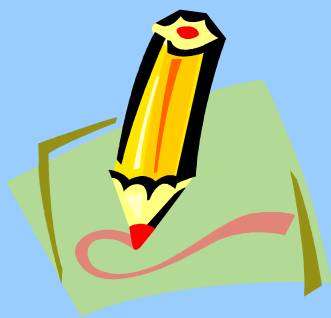
### *Constructed Response*

#### **What is Constructed Response?**

In its most common form, constructed response is a written response to a prompt. Cole (2009) defines a prompt as "any written, graphic, or spoken message that encourages the receiver to act" (pg. 11). Typically constructed responses require students to provide their answers in short, written formats of 1-2 paragraphs, unlike extended responses that may require several pages to develop. Yet, developing constructed response involves more than just providing a written answer...constructing responses requires the application of critical thinking skills. When posed a question or given a stimulus, learners need to think about what is being asked, and then formulate a clear answer that is supported with specific evidence. While constructed response is usually thought of as a written product, it may be communicated in oral form or even through other visual means. Prompts may be **text-based** (rely on information from the text to support the answer), but may also be **self-based** (rely on personal experiences to answer). Text-based prompts are more commonly used with reading, math, science, and social studies content, while self-based prompts are more frequently used in writing and humanities.

#### **Why is teaching Constructed Response a valuable instructional goal?**

While students frequently encounter prompts as forms of assessment during their school careers, prompts are really a part of everyday life. Think about the number of times you've been prompted to give a response to an email correspondence from a colleague, friend, or parent,



**“Writing, to me, is simply thinking through my fingers.”**

~Isaac Asimov



**“I like a teacher who gives you something to take home to think about besides homework.”**

~Lily Tomlin as "Edith Ann"

or been involved in a PET meeting where you've been asked to describe how you differentiated instruction for a student. In these situations, you have to think about your response and provide specific examples to substantiate your answer. Teaching learners how to construct responses teaches them how to think about content, how to organize and synthesize ideas, and how to support their position with evidence that substantiates their claim or argument. Research has demonstrated that frequently engaging students in constructing responses to text based prompts improves reading comprehension (Graham and Hebert, 2010). In order to respond to text-based prompts, students have to unpack text more fully by using the prompt to think critically about the text and by identifying text-based evidence to support their thinking. As an assessment tool, constructed response offers educators a window into students' thinking about their reading or learning.

### **What are some instructional tips for teaching students to construct responses?**

When teaching students how to construct responses, keep in mind the following tips:

- Make constructed response a regular form of writing in which students engage across the curriculum. When students see constructed response as a vehicle they can use to think about ideas, synthesize those ideas, and communicate their understanding, they will grow to view constructed response as a tool for learning, rather than as only an assessment of their learning. Some examples of content area writing can be found in the **Content Strategy** section of this edition of *Literacy Links*.
- Brainstorm examples of constructed response from real-life situations so that students better understand the purpose of constructed response as a life-long communication skill.
- **Model** the process of constructing responses on multiple occasions across content areas and with a variety of text-based and self-based prompts. Use a gradual release framework, providing modeling, guided practice, and independent practice with constructive feedback. Be sure to make your thinking heard by students...think aloud!
- When working with text-based prompts, start with simplistic and enticing texts. When learning new processes, it is better for students to deal with text that they can easily understand and in which they can readily find evidence. Text difficulty can be increased as students grow in their ability to construct responses.
- Teach students how to identify what prompts are asking of them. Prompts often require responders to couple background knowledge (past experiences or parts of the text) with specific petitions (commands), such as analyzing, comparing, or evaluating information. Students must have a clear understanding of petitions and what kinds of evidence petitions will require.
- Teach students frameworks for organizing their responses. There are many frameworks with catchy acronyms, but all follow a similar pattern. Constructed responses generally involve giving an answer and supporting it with specific evidence. Some examples of

## UPCOMING EVENTS



### New England Reading Association Conference

### "Teaming for Literacy"

September 29th and  
30<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Sturbridge Host Hotel  
and Conference  
Center  
Sturbridge, MA

Registration  
Information available  
at:

<http://www.nereading.org/nera.php?id=4>

frameworks can be found in the Professional Text resources described later in this edition of *Literacy Links*.

- Teach specific reading strategies, such as how to skim and scan text to locate evidence, how to identify specific vs. not specific details, how to make inferences, how to connect details across a piece of text, and how to draw conclusions. All of these strategies involve the critical thinking required to construct responses.
- Engage students in opportunities to construct responses orally. Verbal rehearsal is a productive method of supporting the thinking involved in developing written responses, and allows teachers to coach students as they construct their ideas. Students can collaboratively discuss responses to prompts and cooperatively construct responses in oral and/or written formats.
- In the case of text-based prompts, teach students how to stay focused on evidence from the text to support their responses, rather than relying on their own background knowledge as the source of evidence.
- Engage students in opportunities to examine a range of constructed response examples. Teach students how to deconstruct the examples to determine what the responders' positions are and the quality of the evidence or details that support their positions. Teach students to use rubrics to rate the quality of the examples and then help them use the rubrics to examine their own constructed responses.

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## Online Instructional Resources...

The online links listed below offer resources related to the development of constructed responses.

### Writing Fix

This website, developed by the Northern Nevada Writing Project, houses a section devoted to instructional resources for teaching constructed response, including information about several frameworks for organizing responses such as ACES.

- [http://www.writingfix.com/nica/constructed\\_response.htm](http://www.writingfix.com/nica/constructed_response.htm)

### Better Answers and Right Answer Writing (Cole)

This website houses resources that supplement Ardith Davis Coles' Better Answers text (written up under the Professional Text section below).

- <http://schoolweb.missouri.edu/poplarbluff.k12.mo.us/lowe/BetterAnswers.html>

### Better Answers Game

This website is a game designed to help students practice answering questions in complete sentences.

- [http://www.netrover.com/~kingskid/Better\\_Answer/better\\_answer.htm](http://www.netrover.com/~kingskid/Better_Answer/better_answer.htm)



**Maine Reading  
Association and  
the Maine  
Association of  
School  
Librarians  
presents**

**Awaken the  
Reader  
in Every Child**  
Grades 3 - 8

By Donalyn Miller,  
author of *The Book  
Whisperer*

**Saturday, October 15,  
2011  
9:00 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.**

**The Senator Inn & Spa  
Augusta, Maine**

For information, email:

[DMRegistration@hotmail.com](mailto:DMRegistration@hotmail.com)

## **National Assessment of Educational Progress**

This web link is part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress site and it offers sample prompts as well as sample responses and scoring rubrics for constructed response tasks.

- <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/itmrlsx/default.aspx>

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## **Instructional Idea....**

### **Specific or Not Specific?**

One of the strategies readers have to be proficient with in order to develop strong constructed responses is selecting specific details from texts to support their assertions. In her text, The Forest and the Trees: Helping Readers Identify Important Details in Texts and Tests (Heinemann, 2008, pg. 157), Emily Kissner describes an activity called **“Specific or Not Specific?”** in which students read details from a passage and determine if the detail is specific or not specific. Students discuss what makes each detail specific or not specific. Kissner recommends including some statements that could be considered either specific or not specific to extend students understanding. Then students are presented with an idea from the text for which they need to search for specific details to support. This activity can help students become better at determining what makes details specific, as well as how to search for specific details to support an idea.

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## **Summary of Professional Texts...**

**The following texts offer resources for supporting the  
development of constructed responses by students.**

The Forest and the Trees: Helping Readers Identify Important Details in Texts and Tests by Emily Kissner (Heinemann, 2008, ISBN # 13: 978-0-325-01195-0).

In this easy to read text, Kissner demonstrates the importance of helping students become detail oriented learners, and provides multiple examples of how to help them apply this ability to the development of constructed responses. Kissner's text specifically focuses on identifying details and using those details to make inferences, visualize, and understand genre.

Comprehension Connections: Bridges to Strategic Reading by Tanny McGregor (Heinemann, 2007, ISBN # 13: 978-0-325-00887-5).

In this engaging text, McGregor describes concrete instructional approaches for helping students develop comprehension strategies that enable them to construct meaning from texts, including making inferences, questioning, determining importance, visualizing, synthesizing, and being metacognitive.

## Maine ASCD

### Fall Conference

#### *Connecting with the Common Core Standards*

October 24, 2011  
Ramada Conference  
Center  
Lewiston, ME

8:00-2:30

For registration  
information:

[www.maineascd.org](http://www.maineascd.org)



## USM Professional Development Center

Fall 2011 Courses  
and Workshops

[www.usm.maine.edu  
/pdc](http://www.usm.maine.edu/pdc)

[Better Answers: Written Performance That Looks Good and Sounds Smart](#), 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition by Ardith Davis Cole (Stehhouse, 2009, ISBN # 978-1-57110-748-0)

This text provides a detailed constructivist approach to helping students develop written responses to prompts. This second edition includes a CD with instructional tools that supplement the ideas described in the text.

## Children's Literature...

**Read with ME's 2011 Book Choice**

### The Very Best Bed

By Rebekah Raye

(Tilbury House, 2006, ISBN # 13: 978-0-88448-284-0)

This year the *Read with ME* initiative has selected The Very Best Bed by Rebekah Raye to distribute to all of Maine's incoming Kindergarten students. This initiative, sponsored by Fairpoint Communications, provides every Maine Kindergarten student with a copy of the book, family activities based on the book, and tips to encourage their parents to read with them.

The Very Best Bed is the tale of a gray squirrel who is ready for bed, but can't find just the right place to sleep. In his search, he comes across many other Maine animals who are bedding down for the night, but none of their beds suit him. Will he finally find the very best bed? The illustrations and descriptive language in this text offer wonderful opportunities for conversation about specific details, inferences, and Maine wildlife.

## Common Core State Standards...

In April 2011, the Maine Legislature adopted the Common Core State Standards for ELA. These standards will replace the current Maine Learning Result standards for ELA. During the 2011-12 year, educators will begin transitioning to these standards and MDOE will continue to provide support with this process through a variety of online and face-to-face resources. Check out the MDOE's ELA website pages devoted to the Common Core State Standards. Bookmark this link for quick reference and keep checking in for new resources.

<http://www.maine.gov/education/lres/ela/elem.html>



## University of Maine

### Notebook Savvy: Taking a Close Look Inside the Reading and Writing Notebooks

Presented by  
**Aimee Buckner**

The Lovett School,  
Atlanta, GA

May 10, 2012, 9:00-3:00  
p.m.

Wells Conference Center  
University of Maine,  
Orono

Contact:

[Amy.Cates@umit.maine.edu](mailto:Amy.Cates@umit.maine.edu)



## Content Area Strategy...

### Writing Prompts

As Graham and Heibert's (2010) synthesis of the research on the use of writing to improve learning demonstrates, incorporating writing into content study can greatly benefit students' learning and retention of concepts. When writing about content, students need to think about the content and synthesize their understanding of or position on the topic in order to communicate. In essence, students are constructing responses to prompts about the content. There are a variety of ways in which writing about content can be incorporated into ongoing study. A few methods (taken from Fisher and Frey, 2008) are listed below:

- **Exit Slips:** Prior to leaving class, ask students to write in response to a prompt about the content studied that day. For instance, "Three significant ideas we learned about today were...."
- **Admit Slips or Yesterday's News:** When entering class or beginning the day's content lesson, ask students to write about an aspect of the previous day's lesson and/or homework.
- **Found Poems:** Ask students to reread an assigned text to locate key phrases that summarize the content. Have them arrange those phrases as a poem (Dunning & Stafford, 1992).
- **Write a Letter:** Have students write letters to others that encourage them to apply the content they have learned in a variety of ways. For instance, ask students to write a letter to elected official asking about a new law they have studied, or write a letter to a scientist explaining the significance of something the scientist discovered.
- **Take a Stand:** Students discuss their opinions about topics and write an argument taking a stand on the topic.

## News from Maine's English Language Arts Team...

### Literacy Leaders' Network 2011-12

The Maine Department of Education has sponsored the Literacy Leaders' Network (LLN) for the past 5 years. The network has 16 regional locations in which educators meet three times a year before joining together for Spring *Dine and Discussion* evenings in Portland,



## **SNEAK PREVIEW**

### **IN 2011-12 Literacy Links—**

- ❖ *Common Core  
State Standards  
Update*
- ❖ *Online  
Literacy Modules*
- ❖ *Content area  
reading*
- ❖ *WRITNG*



Bangor, and Presque Isle. The LLN offers educators an opportunity to network with other educators who are passionate about literacy related topics, to stay current with literacy related information, and to benefit from ongoing professional development. Text studies and discussion groups are an integral part of the LLN, too. Over 300 educators participated in the LLN during 2010-11. This year the LLN will explore writing instruction, content area literacy strategies, comprehension, and use of online professional development modules. Registration forms for the 2011-12 LLN are available at:

<http://www.maine.gov/education/rf/homepage.htm>.

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We still want your suggestions! As you peruse the monthly editions of *Literacy Links*, you might have topic ideas for the spotlight, instructional strategy, children's literature, professional text, or web site resource sections. We'd love to hear your suggestions. Please email them to: [Leeann.Larsen@maine.gov](mailto:Leeann.Larsen@maine.gov).

For additional information about any of the items in this newsletter or to sign up to receive this e-newsletter, please email

[Leeann.Larsen@maine.gov](mailto:Leeann.Larsen@maine.gov)

Click here to view the Maine Reading First website

<http://www.maine.gov/education/rf/homepage.htm>

The professional development opportunities and materials are listed in *Literacy Links* for informational purposes only and are not necessarily endorsed by the Maine Department of Education's Maine Reading First Initiative.